STAR THROWER

December 15, 1991

8:30 and 11:00 a.m. Worship Services

John M. Buchanan

Fourth Presbyterian Church, Chicago

Scripture
Luke 1:39-45
Matthew 2:1-9

"...they set out; and there, ahead of them, went the star... until it stopped over the place where the child was."

-Matthew 2:9 (NRSV)

It is the hour before dawn on the beach of a small island off the coast of Florida - that wonderful time of eerie half-light, when you can hear but not quite see the ocean, and sky and sea blend into one. For an early morning beach walker it is the best time, the quietest, the most reflective. But from a biologist's perspective, it is a fascinating scenario of nature at its cruelest, most violent and most efficient. The night tide, now receding, is leaving behind a fantastic treasure-of-life: shells and mussels and mollusks and crabs, and loveliest and most vulnerable of all, starfish. To the disciplined eye of the scientist, it is Darwin's survival of the fittest - in microcosm. Most of the life littering the sand will die there, unable to make it back to the sea. Soon the gulls will appear, obeying their own genetic coding, diving, devouring everything in sight.

And then, in the half-light another predator appears. Hunched over with flashlights, baskets and long-handled tongs, first professional shell collectors, working efficiently, picking up the conch shells and starfish; and then the tourists, less efficient, picking up everything.

At the tourist hotels the Darwinian drama continues. Outside there are large boiling kettles for cooking away the inhabitants of the shells, to prepare them for their future on fashionable New York and Chicago coffee tables.

Charles Darwin told us that this is the way it is. Life is a struggle. Only the strong survive. And then, reflecting philosophically on what he observed, he said that nature is absolutely and unalterably selfish. If there was any evidence of a species that acted differently, a species of life that acted in

compassion, kindness and self-sacrifice that others might survive, he would have to reexamine his entire system, he said.

Ahead on the beach, alone and far away, framed by an early morning rainbow, is another figure; bending over, reaching down, examining something and then hurling it back into the sea...

The teller of this story was the late Loren Eisely, Professor of Anthropology at the University of Pennsylvania, a distinguished scientist, and also a poet and author whose observations of the natural world consistently bordered on religion and spirit. One of the last things he wrote before he died was an essay with the wonderful title, The Star Thrower.

> "'A starfish... it's still alive,' I ventured. 'Yes,' he said. 'It may live...if the offshore pull is strong enough. The stars throw well. One can help them.'"

Eiseley walked on, leaving the man to his curious task.

> "I turned as I neared a bend in the coast and saw him toss another star, skimming it far out over the ravening and tumultuous water. For a moment, in the changing light, the thrower appeared magnified, as though casting larger stars upon some greater sea.
>
> "It was as though at some point the supernatural had touched hesitantly, for an instant, upon the natural." [The Star Thrower, Loren Eisely, p. 169-185]

Or, as another writer put it nearly 2,000 years ago:

> "And there ahead of them went the star - until it stopped over the place where the child was."

And so Christmas, a lovely year-end celebration of generosity and warmth and color, a time to breathe in deeply and enjoy aromas of fresh pine, and scented candles and delicious food; a time to hold our dearest ones close, lift hearts and heads and at least once look up into a night sky full of stars and wonder. And shining above it all is that mysterious star.

Christmas is about hope. Christmas is a new and different word about us, about the human condition, about human history. Once we think our way through the tinsel and sentiment of Christmas, we encounter a strong and bold notion that there is hope, hope for the world and hope for us. Once we send all the greeting cards and open all the gifts and, as W. H. Auden quipped, "eat and drink entirely too much," after the celebrating,

Christmas is about the bold and very hopeful notion that in the ebb and flow of life there is a Star Thrower. In those times and places in human history that look like that littered beach, there is a power moving and acting in the other direction. And that includes the slice of human history which is your own life.

There is a Star Thrower. There is hope.

It has been suggested that hope is absolutely essential to human life. "Without hope the people perish," the prophet noted long ago. It is an observation that plays out in front of our eyes. Take hope away and people become desperate. Physicians struggle with the ethical dilemma caused by the conflict between their desire to tell the patient the truth, and the knowledge that without hope people are inclined to give up. Studies of urban violence document the connection to hopelessness. When there is no hope that things are going to get better, human beings are inclined to act less than humanly.

The hope of freedom kept hostages alive. The hope for release, return and reunion with loved ones; i.e. the hope that there will be a future, in some cases - mentally imaged down to the smallest detail - a complete family trip with specific hotels and food ordered from the menu at the restaurant and the amount of the gratuity even became the power to sustain human life for another day.

Ernest Gordon, former Dean of the Chapel at Princeton, a Scotsman, served with the British Army in World War II and was captured by the Japanese. He wrote about his experience in a prisoner of war camp, Through the Valley of the Kwai. Gordon describes the gradual deterioration - physical, mental and spiritual - among the prisoners as the reality of their isolation sunk in. The camp was in the middle of a jungle, there was almost no possibility that anybody even knew they were there, or whether they were dead or alive. They didn't know where they were. Slowly, the vestiges of civilized life eroded. Men became selfish, unkind, cruel, uncaring - even about themselves - a kind of desperate, cynical fatalism characterized once proud and gracious human beings. The turning point came on the day they heard the engines of a plane high overhead. It was an Allied plane. As they watched, it circled, and dipped its wings in recognition. They were seen! Someone knew they were there. There was hope - and the effect was immediate and powerful. Life suddenly had possibilities again, therefore purpose. Order resumed, so did kindness, compassion, pride, even politeness. The good power of hope. For Gordon, it became a religious experience; an encounter with a new idea of God, not simply as a reality of the past encrusted in old stories about a bygone era, even very nice stories, but God as a reality in the future beckoning, calling, promising a God of hope.

That's what Christmas is about; not merely generosity and warmth and festivity, but an incredible notion that there is a God of the future, a God of hope, a God who in the debris and tragedy and randomness of history, and individual human lives like yours and mine, throws a star.

It is a haunting idea. You can hear it in the lovely Old Testament readings for Advent. Isaiah, for instance. Isaiah whose unenviable task it was to write something to a people whose immediate future could not have looked more dismal. Caught in the middle of an international power struggle, their homeland about to be invaded, their prospects were very bleak. And Isaiah wrote about hope:

"The wilderness and dry land shall be glad, the desert shall rejoice and blossom; like the crocus." In the middle of a cruel and unfeeling and violent present, Isaiah held out the hope of peace, when the wolf shall live with the lamb, and the lion and the calf, and there will be no more violence, and a little child will lead them.

Centuries later, that same people were captives again, this time in their own land, occupied by Roman troops, and one of their unmarried peasant girls had a vision.

> "'Greetings, O favored one!'
> The angel said to her, 'Fear not!
> You will conceive and bear a son.
> He will be great...the Son of the
> Most High...
> He will reign forever.'"

A generation later, the Roman Emperor himself decided that the people who were calling themselves Christians were convenient scapegoats for his failed policies and so Nero called them traitors and hunted them down and threw them into the arena to be killed. Frightened, discouraged, huddled together in Corinth, Ephesus, Philippi, and the catacombs of the capital itself, with the whole might of the Empire dedicated to their eradication, they read the words of a martyred preacher named Paul.

> "For in this hope we were saved."

Those people were not naive sentimentalists. They knew, perhaps more clearly than anyone since, that their faith was not going to protect them from harm. Religion was not an insurance policy for them. They had seen too many of their dear ones thrown to the lions to engage in adolescent naivete. Their hope was profound. They endured because they believed and trusted something deeply hopeful which Paul had written not long before his own execution.

"Who shall separate us from the love of Christ?... hardship,...persecution, famine,... peril. No, in all these things more than conquerors through him who loved us."

The Theology of Hope is what it is called and its most eloquent contemporary advocate is a German, Juergen Moltmann, who wrote an important book under the title, The Theology of Hope. "Christianity," he said, "from first to last, is hope, forward looking and forward moving." [p. 16]

Now - the hope we are discussing is not merely what someone has characterized as "pie in the sky bye and bye." It is not merely what Karl Marx once identified as the opiate of the people, the narcotic which keeps people docile and manageable who are suffering in life, because they hope for a better deal in the next world.

Hope in the Bible, the Hope of Christmas, is timely - this worldly. Moltmann observed that "Faith, whenever it develops into hope, causes not rest but unrest, not patience but impatience." [p. 21] Hopeful people are not patient at all. Hopeful people are always pressing for change in the world and in their own lives. People full of Christmas hope, are not self-satisfied, placid celebrants, but the very ones who in the name of Jesus Christ, are out on the edge, pressing for change, working for justice, praying for peace, building houses, tutoring youngsters, feeding the hungry, clamoring for change. People who know about Christmas hope do their celebrating and adoring and worshiping in situations as complex and as political and economic and social as the census in the middle of which he was born and the crowded little town over which the star shone. And so more often than not, you will find them - Christians - wherever there is hopeful ferment - South Africa, Central America, Eastern Europe. To know there is hope is to work for its fulfillment.

It is not always easy to be hopeful. In fact, there is a sense in which hopefulness is not very fashionable these days. As we celebrate the birth this year, there is a gap of unreality widening between the festively decorated department stores and the economic facts of life. The "new narcissism" of the 80s didn't work. We got richer but no happier and now, a newspaper editor noted, as America mopes and the economy slumps, the "new narcissism" has become the "new cynicism." Columnist William Rasberry wrote a devastating article about how it is easier simply to walk away from the problem of homelessness, for instance, because the resolutions are so complicated and so expensive and so unlikely. His social conscience has been transformed, he said, into cynicism. This problem isn't going to be solved anytime soon so it's best just to walk away from it.

Rasberry, of course, was trying to get under our collars and he did just that. But I do believe he's right: that the absence of hope turns us all into cynics. And I do believe it's what Christmas is about, about a theology of hope which will never settle for cynicism, no matter how complex, or potentially tragic, or grim the outlook, or monumental the problems.

Hope is strong in us. Hope is sometimes strongest in us when the situation is most difficult. In fact sometimes it takes a tragedy for us to know how deep hope is in us. American poet Henry Longfellow was devastated by the news that his beloved son had been wounded serving with the Army of the Potomac during the Civil War. It often meant death. He wrote a poem -

> "I heard the bells on Christmas Day
> Their old familiar carols play.
> And in despair I bowed my head
> There is no peace on earth, I said.
> For hate is strong and mocks this song
> of Peace on earth, good will to men.
>
> "Then pealed the bells more loud and deep.
> God is not dead, nor doth he sleep.
> The wrong shall fail, the right prevail,
> With peace on earth, good will to men."

Hope is strong in us. It keeps showing up in unlikely circumstances: in visions of crocus blooming in the desert, in persecuted Christians acting like brave conquerors, in concentration camps and the cells of brave hostages, in apartments at Cabrini Green, and in board rooms of banks downtown. Hope keeps showing up - stunningly this year in a world re-birthing itself, in unthinkable developments, like politicians and military leaders talking about ways to destroy the accumulated nuclear arsenals of four decades. Hope shows up in the most unlikely circumstances - like a stable in a little town in Judea over which a star was thrown into space and time and history.

Out on the beach Loren Eisely thought he heard a voice. "Call me another thrower." The task was impossible. Ahead he saw the thrower, hurling the stars -

> "I never looked again. The task we assumed was too immense for gazing... I picked up and flung a star. Somewhere, far off, across fathomless abysses, I felt as if another world was flung more joyfully... Somewhere, I felt the Thrower knows... Perhaps he smiled and cast once more into the darkness."

Among the last words Eisely wrote were these:

> "Perhaps far outward on the rim of space a genuine star was similarly seized and thrown. Somewhere there is a hurler of stars!"

And so for you this day, there is a word of hope. Regardless of who you are or where you are, there is hope. Regardless of how the future looks to you today, there is hope.

"Fear not" the angel messenger says to everyone who hears about it. Do not be afraid...be of good cheer...be of good hope. There is in the long story of humankind - in your own life - a Star Thrower.

For to you is born beneath that mysterious and wonderful star, a savior who is Christ the Lord. Amen.

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May we know again the wonder and mystery of Christmas, O God. May we know deeply your love for the world and the hope that is ours, in the name of Jesus Christ, our Lord. Amen.